

The 2023 State of Email

Design

Report

The latest in email marketing design data, trends, and best practices, from marketers like you.

What to expect in

The 2023 State of Email Design Report

Welcome to the second installment of our four-part series on the state of email in 2023!

In the State of Email Workflows, we took you through the lifecycle of an email, from the rich and rolling pools of ideation to the final resting places of the ROI calculator. In this report, we're popping open our microscope covers and examining the anatomy of the email up close and personal.

What makes a good email? What tools are email-wizards using to create their best work? What principles and philosophies drive the foremost designers in the business?

Expect answers to all these questions and more in The 2023 State of Email Design Report.

Just the facts

- Chapter 1: Design Approaches
- Chapter 2: **Toolbox**
- Chapter 3: Personalization
- Chapter 4: Artificial Intelligence (AI)
- Chapter 5: Action Items

About this report

We were blown away by the number of responses to this survey! Just like <u>The 2023 State of Email Workflows Report</u>, we reached out to all the talented email marketers in our audiences to gain a comprehensive overview of the email design landscape. And you all answered the call!

The email design survey reached **1,200+ respondents** across multiple platforms worldwide. This time, the largest share of respondents were **Email Developers (50%)**, rather than email generalists, like the workflows survey. The result? A complete guide to how the best email designers in the industry are designing, building, and thinking about emails from start to finish.

Ready to find out what's going on with email design?

Grab your magnifying glasses, scoop up those clipboards, and let's take a closer look at some of the most complex systems in the marketing world. What makes designing an email different from designing, say, a social media campaign or a billboard?

A: While a standard graphic design asset is static, an email is a fluid, dynamic asset that changes based on user or device settings, with over <u>300,000</u> potential renderings. This means that email designers have to make sure their designs look good in dozens, if not hundreds of different configurations of color, text, margins, and more.

Just the Facts

You're busy, we're busy—let's summarize, please! Chop chop.

Here's the short version of our team's top takeaways from the 2023 State of Email Design research.

1. You need an email design expert

In email, specialization is the name of the game. Specialized roles are becoming essential to a successful email program, as the intricacies of email production require someone familiar with the needs of the medium. You need an expert in email to deliver the best experience for your subscribers!

A large percentage of companies have an email design specialist (35%), whether in-house or otherwise.

35%

2. Specialized design tools are necessary

Many designers are still using tools that may not be best suited for email, especially when considering the interest in making interactive email. Adobe Photoshop, for example, wasn't designed with the dynamic nature of email in mind. It's time to shift from thinking about email as a collection of words and images laid out like your favorite science fair posterboard. Instead, think of email as a living, breathing, constantly-responsive layout of code components.

And for that, you need a tool designed for the job.

Speaking of specialized tools...



Streamline your email design process with Litmus. Spend less time building from scratch, and more time creating beautiful emails that get results. <u>Learn more</u>



Over half of email marketing teams want to improve their content personalization.

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3. Personalization is a winning strategy

If you're not personalizing your emails, you're missing out on the heart and soul of digital communication. The human-to-human relationship is essential to effectively reaching subscribers, and new personalization tools have made that process easier than ever.



Do you currently leverage Artificial Intelligence (AI) for email creation?



4. Artificial intelligence (AI) is under the microscope

Everyone wants to know how to feel about Al, including us. Our audience is split right down the middle, with **33% of email marketers we surveyed not using Al** and not planning to do so, and another **39% using Al in some form**. Out of those using Al, applications varied widely. Ultimately, we feel it's a science experiment, and the results aren't in yet. Lots more to come on that horizon!

That's the short version. But don't worry—there's so much more where that came from. To get the long version, just keep turning pages.

> We'll catch you on the flip side. (No pun intended.)

CHAPTER ONE DESIGN APPROACHES

The world of email <u>is beautiful and complex</u>. As a beehive is crafted from thousands of perfect hexagons, by hundreds of thousands of diligent worker bees, so too is the email built, line by line, pixel by pixel, from dozens of different moving parts. And that's not an exaggeration! Even just a single email can require a half-dozen programs to create, design, develop, and eventually send out to thousands of of subscribers.

What ties all those tools together? How does the enterprising email designer know where to start? What guides her vision of the email before it ever makes its great migration into your subscribers' inbox? It's the answers to these questions that will form the strong body of your email design, before venturing out into other parts of the email anatomy.

Here, in our first pass over the foundations of email design, we'll look at the philosophies behind common design approaches—and the minds behind them.

I email, therefore I am.

What's the most common email design philosophy?

Perhaps the most important part of email design is the philosophy behind that design.

Do you want to optimize for desktop users or mobile users? The answer to that question will fundamentally change the kind of email you want to build. Do you want your email to display equally well in both formats? That's great—but you just doubled the amount of work necessary to get that email out in the world.

When we asked our audience, we learned that an ambitious **63% of email marketing teams use a responsive, adaptive, or hybrid design** (controlled/ unique formatting, layout, and content display depending on screen size) approach for email design. We applaud you all! Interestingly, we saw another large number of folks **(34%) optimizing for mobile**, reflecting the shift of the last decade towards mobile use.

What email design approach does your company use?



The hybrid design philosophy is the clear winner here, as it allows your teams to reach the widest possible audience with the best possible content. It's not surprising that it came in first. (And here at Litmus, we think it's worth the effort.)

So, that's lovely, but who's making that decision?

What are the responsibilities of email designers?

In our previous report on email workflows, we found that the largest percentage of our respondents (22%) were email generalists. The legendary all-hats, we take our hats off to you.

In this survey, however, we asked the same question of our audience whose interests lay in email design—and the answer changed. This time, the top responsibilities of email marketers was **Email Development (50.98%)**, with **Email Strategy and Planning (50.74%)** a close second, followed by **Email Design (43.55%)**.



What are your email marketing responsibilities?

Essentially, this means that if you're working on email design rather than the email workflow as a whole, you're likely an **email specialist**.

Are you working with an email design specialist?

Speaking of email specialists, specialization is IN across the board when it comes to design. Where we used to see designers and developers lumped together, or perhaps just simply on the list of duties for a generalist... The times they are a-changin'. Today, Today, **a large percentage of companies have an email design specialist (35%)**, whether in-house or otherwise.

Do you use (on freelance or contract basis) or employ a specialist email designer?



Does your design philosophy account for Dark Mode?

As we've <u>discussed on many an occasion</u>, designing for Dark Mode is a state of mind. It's not a feature, so much as it is an option that must change the way we think about emails from the ground up. It's an approach, not just a toggle switch. (<u>Although we do have that</u>.)



Unfortunately, as of this moment, **33% of** email marketing teams still don't design specifically for Dark Mode. In fact, 23% of email marketing teams make all emails light, even when Dark Mode is selected. (Aww.) When 40% of subscribers are viewing emails in Dark Mode—that's concerning.

There is good news, however! 27% of email marketing teams DO optimize all design and copy for Dark Mode.

If you want to invest in better designs for Dark Mode, you need a tool designed for the job. The Litmus Dark Mode coding experience offers outof-the-box code modules, faster testing and code QA, and more. <u>Learn more</u> So... How's all that going for us?

Overall, we can see a shift towards specialization across the board in email design. Folks are shifting towards hiring email designers with a singular focus who know how to work with the dozens of permutations an email may experience across clients and devices.

And while there's still progress to make on designing responsive, Dark-Mode friendly emails, we're thrilled to see that more folks are getting closer to making working with Dark Mode part of their workflow. Onwards and upwards!

Respecting your subscribers' decisions when showing up in their inbox is paramount to providing a great experience and maintaining a good relationship with your subscribers. With responsive and dark mode coding you can ensure that your subscriber is getting the best experience for their viewing environment."

- Carin Slater, Email and Content Growth Marketing Manager, Litmus



CHAPTER TWO TOOLBOX

Now that we've covered approaches to design, let's go a step further and talk about the tools we use to do the designing. All the theory in the world doesn't do a lick of good until it's put into practice, right?

Well, here's where the rubber meets the road. Where the ligaments meet bone. Where the anatomy of the email begins to take shape! If your philosophy guides the body of the email, then the tools you use to bring that email to life are the legs that connect your email-creature to the ground. (Is an email quadrupedal or bipedal, or something else entirely? Discuss amongst yourselves.)

In this chapter, we'll look at the design, development, and creative tools used to bring your emails to life.

How does your company currently build emails?

First, let's consider how we're building emails. Drag and drop? A new creative design every time? Inquiring minds want to know.

According to our data, the most popular method for building emails is currently **By replacing the text and image coding in a template or previous email (42%)**. That said, the preferred email build method is, as we identified in the previous report, **Using a library of standard components, snippets, or partials (36%)**.



As we can see from the distribution of answers here, we're making progress towards the ideal form of email construction, but many folks just aren't there yet. With the average email team producing <u>3-5 emails at a time</u>, however, it's important to be working with the most optimized processes possible!

Now that we know how we're building, let's look at the design and development tools used to accomplish that.

What's the most common graphic design program used for email marketing?



Which of the following code editors does your company use for email marketing on a regular basis?

Now that we know what we're using for design, let's talk about development. The most used code editors for email marketing are **Adobe Dreamweaver (29%), Text editor (25%), Code editor in my ESP (25%)**, and **Litmus Builder (23%)**. Yes, really, text editors. Brave and noble souls... We salute you.





High-five to those 23% of folks using <u>Litmus Builder</u> to develop their emails! With an HTML Code Editor and/or a drag-and-drop modular building tool in Visual Editor, Builder is a great tool for devs of any skill level to get error-free emails built fast.

Which of the following "other" elements does your company use or plan to use for email development?

With the host of development tools available, let's peek for a minute at some of the most oft-discussed:

No surprises there on the HTML front—it's been the standard for years!



Email marketing teams use or plan to use



Breakfast with a view The all new Alayada Hotel Moon location has everything you ne for your next getaway. Book by 11/14 and get free breaklast fo hot for the duration of your stay.



Finally, let's take a moment to discuss the heavy-hitter of the last decade: multimedia in email. While designers and developers may not love working with this difficult element, its performance can be quite polarizing, for good or ill.

How do multimedia elements perform in email?

We asked our audience whether they felt that videos or animated GIFs improved email performance, and the results were... mixed. When it comes to video, email marketers felt that email performance primarily **Somewhat improved (47%)**, although a solid percentage did see **Much improvement (24%)**. When it comes to animated GIFs, again the majority only saw **Somewhat improved (43%)** performance, while this time the next highest group saw only **A little improvement (27%)**.

Pro tip:

Video playback not working in email? There are ways to faux video with a GIF and/or play button!



How's all that going for us?

So....

Overall, we can see a move towards specialization across the board in terms of tools here, too. Email designers are gravitating towards tools like Figma that are designed with code in mind, rather than Adobe Photoshop or similar tools designed for a different creative purpose. The same is true of developer tools with the use of code editors like Litmus Builder.

Email is it's own medium, and a specialized toolset is emerging for email pros to work specifically with that medium.

Photoshop and Illustrator are best suited for producing ad-hoc visual assets, but Figma shines as an email design tool because it can handle complex layouts, asset creation, and basic image processing. Workflows are more efficient thanks to features like auto-layout, bulk editing, and a robust library system where you can save and reuse components. Figma better reproduces the environment the email will be coded in with CSS properties easy to inspect for developers. It's a web-first design tool that's a better fit for email than traditional print-oriented design tools."



- Hannah Tiner, Marketing UX Design Manager, Litmus

CHAPTER THREE **PERSONALIZATION**

Now that we've traced the anatomy of an email from philosophy to the tools used to bring it to life, let's talk about one of the most popular methodologies to make an email really resonate with the target audience.

If we're talking about the anatomy of the email, this is the beating heart of every email you send. The vibrant powerhouse of communication that reaches out across the inbox and grabs a hand, and holds it.

What is that method? Why, personalization, of course!

Why utilize personalization in your emails?

Well, let's not beat around the bush. As we saw in The <u>2023 State of Email Workflows Report</u>, with over 80% of customers more likely to make a purchase after a personalized experience, and 55% of brands looking to improve their personalization capabilities in the next year—if you're not personalizing your emails, you're missing out on a lot of great ways to reach your audience.





Need more convincing? Right now, **64% of emails** sent by companies leverage personalization using dynamic content, and over half of email marketing teams want to improve their content personalization. At this point, personalized emails are an industry standard and requirement!

How popular is personalization with email design teams?

So we know that our subscribers want to receive personalized emails. But let's take a look at how email design teams feel about working with personalization elements.

First of all, the top email elements used by email marketing teams include **Personalization using dynamic content** (63%), **Personalization in the subject line (60%)**, and **Animated GIFs or PNGs (58%)**. These are the ones most commonly used today, so when we say personalization in an email, those first two are what we're likely referring to.





Over 45% of personalization users saw improvement with interactive email—so yes, absolutely go explore interactive content for your email campaigns!

What elements of personalization improve performance?

Let's talk about how to make personalization part of your email in a way that improves your email performance. According to our data, **personalization using dynamic content** is the best way to improve email performance, with 38% reporting much improved performance after use of these elements. **Personalizing the subject line** was also effective, with 30% reporting much improvement.



Which elements are the most effective at improving performance?

And when it comes to every marketer's favorite activity—A/B testing, of course personalization also topped the charts there! Personalization was the number one mosttested email element at 45%, with emojis and animated GIFs coming in as strong runner-ups.



The elements that email marketing teams A/B test most often:

How to start personalizing?

If you want to start utilizing more personalization in your marketing emails, our email friends have shared some of their strategies. 16% of email marketing teams always personalize the subject line, which can be as simple as adding a single token or merge tag to your email. 19% of email marketing teams always personalize the copy and content. (A little more complicated, but totally worth it.)

The elements that email marketing teams A/B test most often:

Personalization continues to be an increasingly popular method for grabbing audiences, and we're only working on better and better methods for doing so.



Begone, "marketing@brandname.com"!

Try "victoria@brandname.com" or something a little more human to get your subscribers' attention.

Here's an interesting one: 27% of email marketing teams always **personalize the "sender/friendly from" name** meaning they're personalizing with the sender's brand name, or sometimes different people at the company.

What's in these personalization tokens, you ask? Well typically, someone's **Name, company name, or other profile data** (68%)—but we also found that **Customer Segment** (e.g. prospect/customer, seasonal shopper/year-round shopper) (54%) and **Past interactions with emails (44%)** were popular with our respondents.



The top data used to personalize the content of its marketing emails

Important note: while **53% of respondents** said they were using the **tool provided by their ESP** to accomplish all that personalization, many ESPs don't offer a lot of personalization options. Many of these more complex personalization features require a third-party integration with your ESP, or another separate tool entirely.

Unless, of course, you're using Litmus Personalize.

How's all that going for us?

So....

Ultimately, we can see here that **personalization is a winning strategy** that's likely to stick around for years to come. And that makes sense, right? In a world full of digital noise, the more you can craft real human connections, the more you'll stand out as a genuine, authentic brand that stands to meet real human needs.

As you design emails, keep looking for ways to include and improve personalization for your audience.

Personalization has evolved beyond 'Hi [first name].' Many aspects of an email can be personalized-from the email send time, imagery, copy variations, and more. If you're unsure whether a specific personalization tactic will add value to your subscribers, test it out! Gather your learnings and iterate until you determine which areas lead to conversions and are worth personalizing in your email campaigns."

- Tracie Pang, Email Marketing Manager, Litmus



CHAPTER FOUR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Finally, we come to the final (and perhaps most controversial) design trend of them all: Artificial Intelligence (Al). If our design philosophies form the body of our email animal, our toolbox the limbs, and personalization the heart, then Al perhaps represents the brain of our emails. It's a way of leveraging all of human knowledge digested by a machine learning model, and using that to power your emails copy, creative, and beyond.

How smart is the machine? Do we trust it with the delicate grey matter of our email's thinking parts? The jury is... still very divided on the issue.

Let's consider some of the most common questions email marketers are facing related to AI.

Are email marketing teams using Artificial Intelligence (AI)?

Before we discuss theory, let's get the elephant out of the room and figure out how many people are actually using AI, or just talking about it. A **large percentage of email marketers we surveyed (33%) are not using AI**, and not planning to do so. The next largest at (25%) aren't using AI currently, but do plan to sometime in the future.

Do you currently leverage Artificial Intelligence (AI) for email creation?



Now, another strong percentage—combined, 39%—are using AI for some task related to email creation. According to this data, **10% of email marketing teams use AI for** writing email copy right now, and **9% of email marketing** teams use AI for writing subject lines. Finally, in the hardest-sell category, we can see that only **2% of email** marketing teams use AI for image creation.

So, those results aren't particularly decisive. Some people are using AI, some aren't, and those who are using are all using it for something slightly different.

What AI tools are being used in email marketing?

When it comes to tools being used to create using Al, the field is still wide open. OpenAl's **ChatGPT (51%)** dominated—no surprises there, given the recent press followed by **Copy.ai (21%)**, **Scalenut (19%)**, **Anyword (18%)**, **DALL-E (16%)**, and **Jasper (14%)**. Overall, copy creation tools are more popular than image-only tools, and the conversational model of ChatGPT definitely appeals to a lot of people.



So, that's a lot of talk about how email marketers are using Al... But many are still asking that bigger and harder to answer question: Why?

Why should we (or shouldn't we) use AI for email?

In marketing, the numbers talk. And according to Adobe's What is Al Marketing?, released in July 2022, **41% of marketers** say that Al leads to higher revenue generation from email campaigns, as well as a **13% improvement** in click-through rates. So that's some pretty substantial data that says we should be at least experimenting with Al to see how it can work for us.

There's another important distinction to be made when we talk about Al—not all Al is created equal. Generative Al, like ChatGPT, is only as good as the inputs you feed it. And like all machine learning tools, must be trained on something. Other models include chatbots like Natural language processing (NLP) and Large Language Models (LLM), which are valuable for in-app experiences since they use a question-and-answer model that can be very useful for ideation.



How's all that going for us?

So....

Ultimately, the conversation on artificial intelligence is still ongoing. It's uncharted territory, and we're excited to explore with you all and see what the data holds for us.

While generative AI is making waves right now, that's not the only AI out there. Marketers have been using AI to help them spend more time on the important things for years now. Machine learning helps marketers curate the right content for the right subscriber. Predictive analytics helps us determine what content to add to newsletters instead of spending hours trying to figure out what content's going to make readers click. And then of course there's assistive AI, which helps us with menial, time-sucking tasks like project management, copy checking, and even video editing (because we know how effective using video in email can be!).



As marketers, we're always being asked to do more with less. Other types of AI have been successfully integrated into marketing workflows in years past—generative AI just has yet to make that leap successfully.

- Jaina Mistry, Director of Content and Email Marketing, Litmus

CHAPTER 5 ACTION ITEMS

Well, that brings us nearly to the end. We've concluded our survey of the anatomy of email design. From the body of email design philosophies, to the legs and arms of email design tools, to the beating heart of email itself, to even the furthest reaches of artificial intelligence these are the disparate parts that come together to make an email.

But, there's a few more things.

Once assembled, it's important to look at all those pieces together, and the creature that stands before us after the dust has settled. These are the parts of an email in 2023. What does that mean for email designers? What do we do with that information?

Let's consider the data that we have on hand.



#1 Hire an in-house email designer yesterday

You need an expert in email to deliver the best experience for your subscribers. Working with a designer who knows how to design for the dynamic nature of email will drastically change the kinds of emails you're able to produce. Not to mention improve the quality of your outputs.

Hire an email design expert or work with one on a contract basis. They'll understand some of these core email philosophies we talked about earlier, and help your team create unique, vibrant, responsive designs using tools <u>designed for the job</u>.

Email design is alive and well in 2023 as a distinct medium which benefits from specialists and has plenty of room for innovation.

Bottom line? Treat email like the living code that it is, not a print layout or flashy image-only ad. Think about your subscribers' user experience and learn how to use Figma and other design system-based tools."



- Hannah Tiner, Marketing UX Design Manager, Litmus

#2 Invest in dynamic content and personalization

Is your email content shifting to deliver a personalized experience for every subscriber? It should be. Gone are the days of email being a one-size-fits-all endeavor, and the dreaded "email blast" is a thing of the past entirely.

Invest in the personalization tools your team needs to make every email a unique and pertinent one for every subscriber. This can be as simple as adding personalization tokens in your ESP of choice (where possible), or as committed as bringing on a powerful, all-in-one tool like <u>Litmus Personalize</u>.





#3 Help us test the limits of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

There's a lot to consider when it comes to AI, and our data indicates that we aren't all hopping on the bus yet. And it's such a tricky situation, isn't it? Overinvesting in an untested asset could be bad for your email programs in the long run... But there's so much possibility for what AI can do for marketers in terms of time saved and processes simplified.

Contact Us

Hi! We're Litmus – a complete solution for email optimization and personalization that empowers you to transform your entire email workflow. We help email marketers like you create, personalize, test, review, and analyze every email to make every send count. For more information, please check out <u>litmus.com</u> or connect with us on <u>LinkedIn</u> and <u>Twitter</u>. Or both. We won't stop you.

